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A Dull Boy: Stupidity and Affect

A paper in two parts →

PART 1: Stupidity, a history in brief

PART 2: Acts Intelligential

Given the Romantic-era fascination with the figure of the idiot—as evidenced, for instance, in Wordsworth’s lyrical ballad “The Idiot Boy” (1798), and, in fashion, the “idiot sleeve,” ostensibly so named for being designed after the straightjacket used in madhouses at the time—it is perhaps not entirely surprising to find in that period and the next a number of defenses of stupidity of one kind or another. Though a concept of stupidity had been around for a long time—from the Latin *stupidus* or *stupēre*, to be stupid meant to be stunned or benumbed, as in struck dumb by surprise or grief—the term was before the nineteenth century rarely in use. Although Alexander Pope’s *The Dunciad*, whose four volumes were published between 1728-1743, seems obviously to be *about* what we might now class as stupidity—we hear in the poem of dunces, ignorance, buffoonery, “Folly and “Dulness” (both personified), nonsense and absurdity, “Maggots” (essentially, bad ideas), “Emptiness,” coxcombs, asses, and jades, “monkey-mimics,” “a brain of feathers,” and—the most closely related terms—“stupefaction” and “stupefied” (one figure is “stupefied to stone”)—stupidity is mentioned by name only in footnotes, twice referring to critics, and once, more significantly, where it is a lesser evil as compared to Dulness. Here are the lines in the poem to which the note in question refers. The note reads: “Dulness here is not to be taken contractedly for mere stupidity, but in the enlarged sense of the word, for all slowness of apprehension, shortness of sight, or imperfect sense of things. It includes . . . labour, industry, and some degree of activity and boldness – a ruling

principle not inert, but turning topsy-turvy the understanding, and inducing an anarchy or confused state of mind” (note 7 Book 1). Here “dulness” is an active force, industriously affecting body and mind, while stupidity is, by comparison, “inert”: less thoroughgoing and vigorous.

We can compare this to Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667), where the term stupid appears twice, most remarkably in Book 9, at a moment when Satan travels to earth. Finding a serpent asleep on the grass, Satan enters into its body, “at its mouth,” whereupon “his brutal sense, / In heart or head, possessing, soon inspired / With act intelligential” [and it’s worth noting here that it isn’t clear where “brutal sense” resides, or where the “act intelligential” takes place—in the heart, or in the head?]. Satan spies Eve, alone in a dense thicket of trees, and so struck is he by the loveliness of the scene, and by her pleasure in it, that he is momentarily stunned out of his hateful purpose. “That space the Evil one abstracted stood / From his own evil, and for the time remaind / Stupidly good, of enmitie disarm’d, / Of guile, of hate, of envie, of revenge.” Here Milton draws on that earlier idea of stupidity, not as intellectual, but as embodied (the *OED* lists among its earliest uses in English, from 1607, “stupidity and dulnesse of the teeth”). Satan’s “stupidly good” is therefore like the Popean variety in that it is a kind of contraction of force, an abstraction from the normal energies that propel the self, which are, in this case, moral and emotional (hate, envy, revenge). “Stupidly good,” Satan seems for moment to be something other than himself, either because he feels nothing, or because he is nothing *but* feeling, in an experience he cannot comprehend.

In today’s talk I will be emphasizing characterizations of stupidity that bring to the fore these features of its history: not an idea of stupidity as intellectual deficit only (or even at all), but rather as a form of embodiment: physiological and involving encounters with felt, lived

environments. Stupidity here is more like the “astonishment” Descartes describes in *The Passions of the Soul* (1649), where astonishment is wonder’s feeble alter-ego: while wonder prompts investigation and therefore knowledge (wonder is energetic), astonishment freezes the person, like a statue, into their first state of perception, so that they cannot progress, cannot know more about the astonishing thing than they do at that moment. Satan’s goodness, being stupid, is not an active goodness; it cannot move forward or have any real effects, instead locking him into this one temporal moment (as the lines “for the time” indicate). Importantly, it was in the seventeenth century that stupidity began to be considered materially, as a disease or dysfunction of the brain. Thomas Willis’s *De animal brutorum* (1661 lectures; 1672) went against the popular idea that the fool was someone who had been touched by God (an idea lending to fools an association with holiness) to argue that some mental debilities were caused by organic brain disease, and were therefore perhaps capable of cure. Known now as the father of modern neurology, Willis argued that:

Stupidity . . . signifies the defect of the understanding and judgement, nevertheless it is not improperly placed among the diseases of the head or of the brain: to wit as much as that eclipse of the superior soul, proceeds from the Imagination and the memory [being] injured: and the failing of these depends upon the faults of the animal spirits, and of the brain itself.ⁱ

Willis’s contention that, in cases of stupidity, “the brain itself is found to be first in fault,” leads him to conclude that persons are stupid

. . . sometimes [of] an excess of some manifest quality in the brain, as chiefly of moisture and cold, for which reason children and aged persons are often wont to be affected with a dulness of the senses: sometimes a texture too gross and earthy,

so that the spirits cannot easily irradiate it, or make tracts for themselves. To this gross texture of the brain some born of rusticks are frequently obnoxious, so that in some families looking back up on many generations, you will scarce find one wise or witty man. (498)

Willis thus distinguishes between folly and stupidity this way: those who suffer folly are “well and quick enough,” but lack judgment; by “fooling, and doing, and speaking a great many things happily or ridiculously, they move laughter in the standers by.” On the contrary, “those that are stupid either by reason of the defects of the imagination, memory, and judgment, neither apprehend well, nor nimbly, nor argue well.” They do not make sport, as in folly, but behave “blockishly . . . like apes,” and consequently “the simplicity of these is more, who so carry their disease in their countenance and gesture. . . . In stupidity, the spirits of their own nature being dull and obtuse, and residing in a gross and impervious brain, are not able to exert themselves for duly performing the offices of the animal economy” (499).ⁱⁱ It is not only that the stupid “carry their disease” in the body—in the brain, but also in expression and behavior—but also that stupidity is a measure of bodily exertion and of the body’s fitness to varieties of work.

Though Willis notes that “Sometimes a fever has cur’d some fools and stupid persons, and has rendered them more acute,” the reason being “that the febrile heat sometimes rarefies and disperses the mist infecting the brain,” still he concludes: “Therefore, as to the cure of this Disease, Stupidity, whether innate, or acquired, if it be not a plain senselessness, and doltishness, incapable of all erudition, though it be not usually cur’d, yet it is wont to be amended” through the care of “both a Physician and a Tutor” combined (“Of Stupidity or Folly” 500). Stupidity is conceived primarily as a defect in memory or imagination caused by an imbalance in brain

matter, but its effects have everything to do with material existence. Both educative and medical interventions are prescribed.

I will be arguing today that, where idiocy—at both the beginning and the end of the nineteenth century—identified a kind or type of person and, very often, a permanent state, stupidity was a more protean and democratic term: not permanent, not a human type, but a condition or sensation into which one can, indeed *will*, from time to time, fall. This is not to say that the idea of the type went away: the perpetual idiot of the Romantic variety—Wordsworth’s idiot boy or Charles Dickens’s Barnaby Rudge (published 1841, set during the Gordon Riots of 1780)—or the moral idiot, like Thackeray’s Barry Lyndon (1844), someone congenitally stuck in an unchanging mental or moral state, persists. And with the advent of eugenics at the end of the century, this idea returns, if in altered form, in such works as Lewis Terman’s 1906 PhD thesis, *Genius and Stupidity: A Study of Some of the Intellectual Processes of Seven ‘Bright’ and Seven ‘Stupid’ Boys*, or Henry Herbert Goddard’s system of “mental ages,” with “morons” having the mental ages of between 8-12 years, “imbeciles” 3-7 years, and the “idiot” under 2. In fact, stupidity was the object of intensive study well into the twentieth century (in Britain, America, and France) and was treated with scientific seriousness. Stupidity afflicted groups, and the idea was to determine the cause. For instance, Walter B. Pitkin, staunch eugenicist and self-proclaimed acolyte of Samuel Smiles, published *A Short Introduction to the History of Human Stupidity* in 1932, arguing that technological innovation causes tasks to be performed more efficiently, and so cut down on the number of people needed to do them, resulting in an “appalling surplus of Stupids and Humanesques, relative to jobs which utilize their low abilities” (4). A similar argument appears in John Fischer’s *The Stupidity Problem and Other Harassments* of 1948, which claims that once physical labor is made obsolete, a “dim-witted” majority is

deprived of traditional means of employment. No longer useful as laboring bodies, those afflicted with the stupidity problem become parasitic on the general good. The intelligent also suffer, “liv[ing] in frustration, because they can [find] no work equal to their talents” (73). Finally, the psychoanalyst William Bergler writes in *The Talent for Stupidity* (1952) of a category of people he describes as “injustice collectors”: people who complain of (imagined) continual mistreatment by others, not realizing—and this is their stupidity—that they unconsciously seek out punishment, so as to savor masochistically in their own defeat. Bergler describes this “common-place spectacle of pronounced ‘dumbness’ [as] an attribute of the normal intelligence”: “the end of the old-fashioned concept of ‘stupidity,’” he writes, “is foreshadowed by the emergence of a scientific understanding of *neuroticism affecting the intellectual sphere*,” he writes; stupidity is “a neurotic symptom and sign” (xxxv). Although Bergler’s stupidity-as-neurosis is not identical to the enervating “Stupids” of Pitkin or Fisher, it does describe a category of persons (injustice collectors) in need of medical (or, psychological) intervention. And their malady is “common-place.” Indeed—and this is where Bergler differs most from these others—stupidity is an “attribute of the *normal intelligence*.” It is something that can or might affect us.

So—between Milton and Pope at the one end, and Bergler on the other, Britons had an increasing lot to say about stupidity. This includes major authors, such as George Eliot and Henry James: the term “stupidity” (in one form or another) appears some 47 times in *Middlemarch* (1871), and 28 times in *The Golden Bowl* (1904). In neither of these texts is stupidity confined to idiots. Meanwhile Tennyson, whom Auden called “undoubtedly the stupidest” of the English poets, set about inventing neologisms, such as “stupid-wild” (in *Becket*, 1884) and “stupid-honest” (in *Harold*, 1876). We will now look at a few lesser examples, from

the periodical press, which will help to establish this movement away from the idea of the fixed human type, the individual (as in the Romantic “idiot”) and the messier, widespread, group or national stupidity that comes into being over the course of the nineteenth century. “Ode to Stupidity,” by one “Mr. Hole,” published December 1792 in the *Universal Magazine of Knowledge and Pleasure* (and reprinted, the following year, in the *Weekly Entertainer*), offers its “languid song” to a power that “deadens each active power of soul” and blunts “the thinking mind”: “This state of Dulness realiz’d, / Is to be envied, not despis’d,” the speaker says. The poem’s central claim is that stupidity, an “unfeeling Folly,” blocks pain; this stupefaction has certain benefits, melancholic though they may be. It produces “calm Indifference” to the many causes or signs of suffering: the pricks of want, the orphan’s cry, death, the widow’s tears. And it obliterates the pains of memory: former ills and future worry “are nothing, if forgot.” Stupidity offers here a kind of easeful oblivion, a mode of escape. In my next example, the mode is decidedly more comic, and the scene has changed. “The Pleasures of Stupidity, by an Etourdi,” published in *The Inspector and National Magazine* in 1827, contrasts an older form of stupidity to a new. The old version, in “the extravaganza style,” follows the conventional notions of the idiot: “a lank, slovenly, shoetieless, moon-visaged fellow, whose eyes seem daily traveling back into his cranium; a sleepiness, a mistiness, the spirit of downright dullardism playing over his face” (52). The newer, pleasurable variety, on the other hand, is neither slovenly nor atavistic, but belongs to the city set, to modern men about town. It is not anti-intellectual: “I have a decent quantum of intellectual *fulgor* in mine eye-balls,” the author explains. A coping mechanism that provides “escapes from what would have been painful”—namely, drawing-room conversation, with its pompously stylized talk, in-jokes, and the “waggeries of town-taught wisdom” (53)—stupidity here manifests as a cultivated imperviousness to energetic, empty banter, town talk,

innuendo, and volleys of wit (52). Energy is once again a central feature of the experience of stupidity, but here it is the world that moves—and talks—too fast and too much, and stupidity as an adaptation—a learned stance or habit—is the antidote.

An idea of stupidity as a national problem becomes more pronounced as the century wears on. “Has not everything which is distinctively characteristic of English habits, English enthusiasms, and English panics something more than a touch of stupidity in it?” asks the author of “The Future of Stupidity,” published in 1858 in the *Saturday Review*; “What is to become of the Stupid Men in the next generation?” (249). The author goes on to identify the problem, which has to do with fitness to work and with education, specifically the “examination system,” including the civil service exam (introduced in 1858) that, “falling like a blight on the fat face of Stupidity,” prevents hearty Englishmen from obtaining jobs (*ibid.*). “It was at Oxford and Cambridge that the disease began which has since spread over England, and afflicted every variety of the human vegetable,” the author says:

Boards and Commissions were established, who examined youths whom they had not educated, and then guaranteed their fitness or unfitness for every human pursuit and calling. . . . And now, in the course of the last few weeks, the fell pestilence has made a sudden leap and buried itself in the very entrails of the English society. The great middle class—the bulwark, the fortress, the continuing city of British Stupidity—has been invaded Youths who, six months ago, looked forward with well-founded confidence to the post of drapers’ assistant . . . have had their fond hopes dashed and their career destroyed at the outset. A happier aspirant, with the certificate of A.A. in his pocket, has stepped proudly

behind the counter, and the rejected candidate turns away in bitter despair,

thinking he would surely enlist if he were sure there was no entrance exam. (ibid)

The author's lament that decimals training has become the order of the day, leaving little time for ponies, points to anxiety about the enfeeblement of the English national body. The article concludes: "The muscles are, after all, with the stupid men" (250). Like this author, the author of a different essay, "The Philosophy of Stupidity" (published in *The Scottish Review* in 1882), makes the similar case that stupidity is behavioral, and that it is learned: "This possibility of artificially producing stupidity," he writes, "is the special reason why the defect is worth careful attention" ("333). Perhaps it is little wonder, then, that in 1932 Pitkin could declare: "a thorough inquiry into stupid people and their acts has become a major issue of statesmanship." It was hardly a new idea by then, and would instead have been familiar to the Victorians, of which he, having been born in 1878, was one.

PART II: Acts Intelligential

For the rest of my time I will be focusing on a few of the ideas raised thus far: an idea of stupidity as embodied, involving both feeling and energy, in varying degrees, and having also to do with degrees of activity and spheres of labor. Additionally, I will be thinking of stupidity as afflicting groups (this might be physiological, psychological, or sociocultural and environmental, or some messy combination of these)—and as capable of cure, but also, as I want now to emphasize, as potentially of value—not a disease to be remedied but advantageous, or at the very least useful, or—if we want to get down to it—a fact of life, and so something people have to find ways to live with. Rather than the escapist, individuated pleasures of the "Ode to Stupidity,"

however, I'm going to be more interested here in collectivities and habits learned. And so we will make our way back to Samuel Smiles, and arrive—at long last!—at the first of my title's dull boys:

Hence it happens that the men who have most moved the world, have not been so much men of genius, strictly so called, as men of intense mediocre abilities, and untiring perseverance; not so often the gifted, of naturally bright and shining qualities, as those who have applied themselves diligently to their work, in whatsoever line that might lie. “Alas!” said a widow, speaking of her brilliant but careless son, “he has not the gift of continuance.” Wanting in perseverance, such volatile natures are outstripped in the race of life by the diligent and even the dull. “Che va piano, va longano, e va lontano,” says the Italian proverb: Who goes slowly, goes long, and goes far.

Hogarth, though a very dull boy at his lessons, took pleasure in making drawings of the letters of the alphabet, and his school exercises were more remarkable for the ornaments with which he embellished them, than for the matter of the exercises themselves. In the latter respect he was beaten by all the blockheads of the school, but in his adornments he stood alone. His father put him apprentice to a silversmith, where he learnt to draw, and also to engrave spoons and forks with crests and ciphers. From silver-chasing, he went on to teach himself engraving on copper, principally griffins and monsters of heraldry, in the course of which practice he became ambitious to delineate the varieties of human character. The singular excellence which he reached in this art, was mainly the result of careful observation and study.

Samuel Smiles, *Self-Help* (1859)

Self-Help is a paean to dullness. Along with Hogarth (“a very dull boy at his lessons”), Sir Walter Scott, Joshua Reynolds, and William Blake are also, in this book, represented as dull. So too the painters Edward Bird, Claude Lorraine, J.M.W. Turner, and William Etty, who was “looked upon by his fellow students as a worthy but dull, plodding person.” As was missionary John Williams, “the martyr of Erromango,” who was “considered a dull boy,” and Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton, M.P., once “a dull, heavy boy, distinguished for his strong self-will”; or indeed Sir Isaac Newton, who, “though a comparatively dull scholar, . . . was very assiduous in the use of his saw, hammer, and hatchet.” Dullness here means something like stupidity as we understand the term today: unlike lofty, “bright and shining” genius or “brilliance,” dullness is

plodding, slow, persevering in earthly, bodily acts. For Smiles, though, this dullness is good. Where genius lacks “continuance”—it dazzles energetically, then flames out—dull boys working at dull things become self-trained, serious men. As in the famous case of Turtle v. Hare, slowness wins the race. “The maxim is often quoted of ‘All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy,’” Smiles tells us; “but all play and no work makes him something greatly worse.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Dullness and stupidity, as we have seen, share meaning. Dullness in the *OED* is “Not quick in intelligence or mental perception; slow of understanding; not sharp of wit; obtuse, stupid, inapprehensive.” Like *stupere* and *stupidus*, dullness involves embodiment, a want of “sensibility or keenness of perception in the bodily senses and feelings”; “of pain or other sensation: not keen or intense.” Dullness might name an atrophied or attenuated sensibility, a feeling *less* than; or it might name something felt in an ongoing way, not keenly but habitually, as in a dull ache or pain. Like stupidity, dullness is slow and low, temporally and energetically: “not brisk; inert, sluggish, inactive; heavy, drowsy.” As an aspect of mood, it involves the blunting of spirits, depression, melancholy, and “gloom.” These two terms—dullness and stupidity—seem to have been more or less interchangeable in 1833 when, in *Illustrations of Political Economy*, Harriet Martineau wrote of a boy named Temmy, “He was rather a dull child—usually called uncommonly stupid.”^{iv} Temmy seems congenitally slow after the fashion of the Romantic idiot, yet Martineau tells us that his stupidity is in fact an effect of power: “uncle Arthur was full of indignation at Temple for cowing the child’s spirit, and thus blunting his intellect,” she writes. Temmy has *become* stupid, having suffered mistreatment at the hands of his rich, slave-owning father. The cause isn’t brain defect but emotional abuse.

Such a stupidity is less strictly a matter of intellect alone than something experienced, involving feeling—emotion, but also organs and skin. This understanding of stupidity as

embodied prompts us to consider it less a matter of individual I.Q.—that association hardens only with eugenics—and more like those things that today we call affects, transmissible between bodies in the manner of what Anne Cvetokovich has called “public feeling”: shareable and felt by groups (especially politically marginalized groups).^v As Kathleen Stewart observes in her book *Ordinary Affects*, “power is a thing of the senses. It lives as a capacity, or a yearning, or a festering resentment” (85-6). According to Stewart, all affects, even ordinary ones, involve relational performances of power and its absence.^{vi} They involve publics. As Spinoza has it: “in affect, we are never alone” (Massumi’s gloss, *The Politics of Affect*, 6).

So what happens if we begin to treat stupidity in ways similar to some of the ways that we have begun of late to think about affect? Along with Cvetkovich and Stewart, we might consider Elizabeth Wilson’s *Gut Feminism*, which sees depression as an affliction of mind *and* stomach—“the gut is an organ of mind,” she says; “it ruminates, deliberates, comprehends” (5)—or Teresa Brennan’s *The Transmission of Affect*, which sees affects as coming in from outside of us, generated by the bodies of others and registering in us as felt and experienced shifts in mood even when they do not rise to the level of consciousness or acquire names. It doesn’t really matter (to me) whether or not it is scientifically true that we can, as Brennan believes, “smell” affects (she speculates that they are transmitted by way of pheromones), but that this idea of affects as “profoundly social” leads back to older ways of conceiving the self (68). Critiquing an Enlightenment notion of the bounded self—a body with borders, its emotions generated from within—Brennan returns to pre-eighteenth-century discourses of the passions to suggest that these earlier theories got something right that we now get wrong: that affects are transmissible through bodily proximity to others, not so much emanating from our minds but entering our skins.^{vii} This return to and reconception of the permeable body is in keeping with

other recent work on what Kyla Schuller calls “the biopolitics of feeling,” which reconsiders such concepts as sentimentality as involving “more than an exchange of ideas and emotions,” for it involves, as she says, “a form of embodiment, a ‘bodily bond’” with others and with the outside world (citing Glenn Hendler, 3). Here “bodies not only flow into each other via their inlets; impressibility also adheres each body to the population, such that common influences forge common desires and instincts”: “the flow of unconscious influences forges individuals into ‘a general mass’” (she is citing Horace Bushnell’s 1852 tract *Unconscious Influences*, [9]). The impressible body is, in this account, “a biopolitical effect,” in that the discourses of sentimentalism generate “a broad regulatory technology” dividing those who feel properly from those who don’t (9). Affect “depends on the notion of an impaired relationality as its constitutive outside,” she writes; it depends on its “definitional opposite, debility, for theoretical solidity” (13). The same is true of a concept like intelligence, which depends on its definitional opposite, stupidity. Except that, as we have seen, stupidity has not always been seen to be the reverse of intelligence, nor its absence, but can name instead a range of experiences of the material or phenomenological world. These paired concepts, then—intelligence and stupidity or dullness, good feeling and bad or disabled feeling—are more than just structurally alike. They are, and were for some writers in the nineteenth century, co-constitutive concepts, mutually interdependent and defining.

I want to turn now to another text with bearing on my claim that stupidity is an affect, and that it was conceived as such by some in the nineteenth century. The book is Jacques Rancière’s *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (1987), which addresses the tensions of post-1968 France (the student riots) by turning to the story of another revolutionary moment, 1815, the year of Napoleon’s defeat at Waterloo, and the year when the

French schoolteacher Jean Joseph Jacotot was exiled to Belgium, where he went on to develop a revolutionary pedagogy while teaching at the University of Louvain. Jacotot's students spoke Flemish; he spoke only French, and so could not teach in the usual ways. He assigned a single book—Fenelon's *Telemachus*—and invited students to “read” it despite its having been written in language they didn't understand. I will be focusing on just a few aspects of this experimental pedagogy, about which Jacotot began publishing in the early 1820s.^{viii} First is Jacotot's principle thesis, that “*all men have equal intelligence*” (18, original emphasis). That thesis rests on an understanding of intelligence not as content, an accumulation of what one knows, but as a power. Rancière refers to this power as will, but it is clear that this power is not merely cerebral, and that it everywhere involves the vocabularies of sentiment. It is, he says, “the sentiment of the inequality of intelligence, the sentiment that distinguishes superior minds only at the price of confusing them with universal belief,” that “makes society turn on itself from one age to the next” (86). This was true of the Athenian people, whose “*stupidity*”—and here Rancière uses that term—lay in “the feeling of its obvious superiority over the imbecile people of Thebes” (ibid, original emphasis). Stupidity is a public feeling. This is why, for Jacotot/Rancière, speaking to men *as men* makes them so. Modes of address, ways of speaking, are what produce “intellectual emancipation”: “Knowing is nothing, *doing* is everything” (Rancière 97, 65, original emphasis).^{ix}

Defining intelligence as a matter not of what one knows but of what one does, Jacotot/Rancière, like Samuel Smiles, emphasizes bodies at work. Groping, “the way children move, blindly,” testing and repeating, comparing and verifying results, with “all [one's] exploration . . . strain[ing] toward this”: all of this is “doing” (10-11). Intelligence is represented as a capacity for plodding exploration and slow discovery. It is a feeling of one's way. Here is

Jacotot's "translation" (Rancière's term) of Descartes's thought experiment involving a piece of wax:

I want to look and I see. I want to listen and I hear. I want to touch and my arm reaches out, wanders along the surfaces of objects or penetrates into their interior; my hand opens, develops, extends, closes up; my fingers spread out or move together by my obeying my will. In that act of touching, I know only my will to touch. That will is neither my hand, nor my brain, nor my touching; that will is me I consider ideation like touching. I have sensations when I like; I order my senses to bring them to me; I have ideas when I like; I order my intelligence to look for them, to feel. The hand and the intelligence are slaves, each with its own attributes. Man is a will served by an intelligence. (54-5)

Rancière goes on to add that "Idiocy is not a faculty; it is the absence or the slumber or the relaxation of intelligence." In so doing, he reinforces an understanding of hand (body) and intelligence (mind) as "doing," or performing, in similar ways. Both reach out for and "feel"—feel out and touch—the world (ibid). Indeed body and mind do the same kind of work:

It's Menenius Agrippa who is speaking now. And the details of what he is telling the plebians matter little. The essential thing is that he is speaking to them, and they are listening to him; that they are speaking to him and he hears them. He speaks to them about legs and arms and stomachs, and that's perhaps not very flattering. But what he imparts to them is their equality as speaking beings, their capacity to understand as soon as they recognize themselves as equally marked by the sign of intelligence. **He tells them that they are the stomachs**—this derives from the art learned by studying and repeating, by breaking apart and putting back

together others' speeches. . . . he speaks them as men, and, in so doing, makes them into men. (97)

And so to the second point. Rancière/Jacotot argue that it is nondemocratic and wrong to believe that some people (some students) are smart and knowing, and others ignorant, some mature and others unformed. Such a fiction “works by representing inequality in terms of velocity—as ‘slowness,’ ‘backwardness,’ ‘delay,’ . . . [and] ‘lag,’” such that students can never “catch up” to their teachers (Ross, Translator’s Introduction xx). They inhabit a kind of queer temporality like that described by Jack Halberstam, Heather Love, and others: perpetually backward and behindhand, retarding normal processes, timetables, and clocks.^x But here too slowness, backwardness—stupidity, if you will—is social and structural rather than personal. For Jacotot/Rancière, it is teaching by “explication” that incapacitates students in this way, cementing a self-understanding of themselves as perpetually incapable of learning without the aid of the schoolmaster, who knows all answers in advance. This incapacitated state is called “stultification” in the English translation, but, as the translator Kristin Ross explains: “In the absence of a precise English equivalent for the French term *abrutir* (to render stupid, to treat like a brute), I’ve translated it as ‘stultify.’ Stultify carries the connotations of numbing and deadening better than the word ‘stupefy,’ which implies a sense of wonderment or amazement absent in the French” (7). Unlike the groping learner, feeling her way, the stultified—we might say the stupid—child feels only one thing: grief. Power is a thing of the senses. “The child who is *explained to* will devote his intelligence to the work of grieving,” Rancière writes; “to understanding that he doesn’t understand unless he is explained to.” This child is stupefied not by submission to “the rod” but to a more insidious form of power, “a hierarchical world of intelligence” in which he will always feel himself behind and below his intellectual betters (8).

Stupidity is here a social position and a measure of power, a ranking low in a hierarchy of economic and intellectual inequity.^{xi} But it is also an attitude, indeed a disabling one: a feeling that unequal conditions are right.

Jacotot's ideas came to England from France by way of the British educationalist Joseph Payne, who in 1830 published a study of his work. According to one historian, their (he says, limited) popularity in England had to do with the fact that Jacotot's thesis resembled less "the 'environmentalist' argument that comparable egalitarian philosophies of education" put forward at the time "but ha[d] more in common with the 'self-help' tradition of writers like Samuel Smiles" (Howatt 170).^{xii} It seems plausible to me that this resemblance might be evidence of the lastingness of some of Jacotot's propositions. In *Self-Help*, for instance, Smiles recounts little biographical stories such as that of Samuel Lee, Cambridge professor of Hebrew, who "sold his Greek books, and bought Hebrew ones, and learnt that language, unassisted by any instructor, without any hope of fame or reward, but simply following the bent of his genius." Lee learned Hebrew from an ignorant schoolmaster: himself.

Jacotot's argument that all learning is contained in a single book, since what matters is not its content but the methods one uses to make sense of it, was reproduced in England in such pamphlets as *An Account of Jacotot's Method of Universal Instruction*, by "B. Cornelius, Principal of the Pestalozzian School at Epsom," printed in London in 1830 and reviewed in the *Atheneum* and elsewhere (Vol. 3 no. 146, 504). "Pestalozzian" means relating to or constituting a system of education in which the sense perceptions are first trained and the other faculties are then developed in what is held to be natural order, named after Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827), a Swiss teacher and educational reformer whose motto was "Learning by head, hand and heart" [according to Wikipedia, "thanks to Pestalozzi, illiteracy in 18th-century

Switzerland was overcome almost completely by 1830” – he advocated training through GROUP exercises and activities, rather than approaches that emphasized individuals]. Cornelius rather crankily concedes that, despite Jacotot’s “zealot[ry]” and “arrogant demeanor,” his ideas have something in common with Sir Walter Scott’s, who observed that one reason why “such numerous instances of erudition occur among lower ranks is that, with the same powers of mind, the poor student is *limited to a narrow circle* for indulging his passion for books, and must necessarily make himself master of the *few* he possesses ere he can acquire more” (vi, 2-3, 28-9). Having only a few books can be an asset. In fact, mere sentences will do: “Take, for example, a portion of a sentence in the first paragraph . . . and confine yourself to an explanation of it, as an instance of predication. At once you open the whole philosophy of language and of logic; the mysteries of the *subject*, the *copula* and the *predicate*; the proofs that all science and literature—in a word, all the productions of the human intellect, are but so many varyings of that simple process of predication” (Cornelius 29). In sum: all intelligences are equal; everything one needs to know is contained in a single book, perhaps even a single paragraph written in a foreign language through which one feels one’s way. Cornelius quotes Buffon in stating: “Genius is but an aptitude of patience” (Cornelius 30). It is, like its necessary counterpart, that debility we call stupidity, an attitude, a stance, and an embodied, felt experience of the world (in this case, of time). Here is Cornelius describing an “improvising” student, feeling—but also losing—his way in an oral presentation: “All eyes being fixed on him, he is embarrassed, he stammers, and at length becomes dumb. But this is not a defect of genius, it is merely . . . a want of self-possession. . . . hence he sees nothing that he ought to see; he can compare nothing; he has lost the standard by which he ought to measure himself and others; he has lost genius, because he has lost the balance of judgment. Hence the first rule of *improvisation*: *Acquire the mastership of*

your own feelings” (39). Here, to lose one’s “genius” is to perform poorly, to become embarrassed—to feel stupid. But this stupidity can be unlearned or, more to the point, *undone* through a change in attitude, bearing: through mastery of the emotional self.

Cornelius’s Jacotot is not identical to Rancière’s, and no doubt this emphasis on emotional mastery would have had different consequences for different classes of people in the 1820s and 30s. If genius is equivalent to it, women cannot but be stupider—and not just them. In the final moments of this talk I want to turn to George Eliot, starting with *The Mill on the Floss* (published in 1860 but set in the 1820s and 1830s), a novel fixated on questions of intellectual difference and on what it calls “edification,” from the moment we learn that Mr. Tulliver chose the dullest of the Dodson girls to marry (“I picked the mother because she wasn’t o’er ‘cute I picked her from her sisters o’ purpose ‘cause she was a bit weak, like” [68]), to his desire to make his son Tom “a bit of a scholar,” which leads to Tom’s stultifying stint at the Rev. Mr. Stelling’s, purveyor of useless Classical training (56). His teacher considers Tom “a thoroughly stupid lad,” having a “natural stupidity” (208)—something congenital, inborn—and even Tulliver, himself described as “rather a dull fellow” (205), classes Tom among the “stupid lads” (69), calling him as “a bit slowish” (59).^{xiii} But it’s not just them. Aunt Deane speaks to *all* children as if they were “deaf or perhaps rather idiotic” (118), Tom calls Maggie “a stupid” twice (146); even Phillip Wakem is a “caressed mollusc” (248). Dullness abounds.

In fact Eliot’s narrator repeatedly, and quasi-satirically, represents the entire era as duller than the present, as a time when “ignorance was much more comfortable than at present” (185), England populated by “unspeculative minds” (386). Eliot’s commitment to representing what she calls the “narrow, ugly, grovelling existence” (362) of people like “those emmet-like Dodsons and Tullivers” (363), and her “cruel conviction” that the human lives that make up that “gross

sum of obscure vitality . . . will be swept into the same oblivion with the generations of the ants and beavers,” involve a recognition that intelligence and dullness are effects and inequivalencies of power and so, too, are things of the senses—not measures of intellectual content, in the manner of personal I.Q., so much as affective and embodied group responses to biopolitical circumstance (362). Eliot worried that “intellectual errors we once fancied were a mere incrustation” can grow “into the living body and . . . cannot in the majority of cases [be] wrenche[ed] . . . away without destroying vitality.” This worry demonstrates, I think, an understanding of stupidity (or “intellectual error”) as thoroughly embodied: not superficial (as an incrustation might be, a hardening of the skin) but integrally bound up in biological life (what Eliot calls “vitality”) (letters, Vol 1 p 162). “I am telling the history of very simple people, who never had any illuminating doubts as to personal integrity and honor,” Eliot writes (371); but she also asks: “How *should* they know?” (364). The question lends new seriousness to an otherwise more comic passage in the novel in which the narrator writes of Tom in Book II, entitled “School- Time”: “It is doubtless almost incredible to instructed minds of the present day that a boy of twelve, not belonging strictly to ‘the masses’ who are now understood to have the monopoly on mental darkness, should have had no distinct idea how there came to be such a thing as Latin on this earth” (209). Tom is made so “uncomfortable” by his educational training that it is “as if he had been plied with cheese in order to remedy a gastric weakness which prevented him from digesting it.” “It is astonishing,” the narrator exclaims, “what a different result one gets by changing the metaphor! Once call the brain an intellectual stomach, and one’s ingenious conception of the classics and geometry as ploughs and harrows seems to settle nothing.” Refiguring the metaphor of the human brain as a field to be sown, this shift to an idea

of the brain as “an intellectual stomach” figures the labors of the mind and the body as parallel intelligential acts.

For this reason, I think, moral stupidity is itself not quite as simple a category for Eliot as it has sometimes seemed. Here is the famous passage from *Middlemarch* on the topic:

Today she [Dorothea] had begun to see that she had been under a wild illusion in expecting a response to her feeling from Mr. Casaubon, and she had felt **the waking of a presentiment that there might be a sad consciousness** in his life which made as great a need on his side as her own. We are all of us born in moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves: Dorothea had early begun to emerge from that stupidity, but yet it had been easier to her to imagine how she would devote herself to Mr. Casaubon, and become wise and strong in his strength and wisdom, **than to conceive with that distinctness which is no longer reflection but feeling – an idea wrought back to the directness of sense, like the solidity of objects**—that he had an equivalent centre of self, whence the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference.

Dorothea’s emergence from “moral stupidity” has always been taken to be an advancement in her development, away from the self-involvement of the infancy, incapable of distinguishing its desires from the world, and toward a recognition of the different experiences of others. That’s not wrong. But moral stupidity is less like an encrustation (a false belief) that can be cut off or shed, than like a deeper embodiment; any attempt at cutting out the disease, with a scalpel, tends to the destruction of life. I tend to see Eliot’s many comparisons of persons to emmets, beavers, and ants as indicating that she saw the majority of humankind not (or not only) as benighted and belated—intellectually stupid, slow and behindhand, needing to catch up—but as a resource, a disabled, embodied vitality that the presumption of intelligence, or even an “intense mediocr[ity]” like that described by Samuel Smiles, could begin to enable and tap. Ants and beavers are nothing if not energetic. We might, then, take more seriously Mr. Tulliver’s frustrated remark that “a perfectly sane intellect is hardly at home in this insane world” (69). Stupidity is not so much not-thinking, thinking’s antithesis, but thinking that feels its relation to

its own powerlessness (see Birgit Erdle, Adorno essay 266). This “obscure vitality” is a “social feeling,” to use Eliot’s own phrase: obscure because hidden to history, as in unrecorded, but also because unintelligible, or unrecognizable—to us—AS intelligence.

ⁱ Thomas Willis, *The London Practice of Physick*. Bassett, Dring, Harper, and Crook. 1692. EEBO (The Bodleian Library).

ⁱⁱ In medieval Europe the seven mechanical arts (weaving, agriculture, architecture or masonry, warfare and hunting,) trade, cooking, and blacksmithing or metallurgy) were contrasted to the seven liberal arts.

ⁱⁱⁱ See also Postlethwayt, cited by Marx in chapter 10 (“The Working Day”) of *Capital* (1867): “We [must acknowledge] that trite remark in the mouth of too many; that if the industrious poor can obtain enough to maintain themselves in five days, they will not work the whole six. Whence they infer the necessity of even the necessities of life being made dear by taxes, or any other means, to compel the working artisan and manufacturer to labour the whole six days in the week, without ceasing. I must beg leave to differ in sentiment from those great politicians, who contend for the perpetual slavery of the working people of this kingdom; they forget the vulgar adage, all work and no play. Have not the English boasted of the ingenuity and dexterity of her working artists and manufacturers which have heretofore given credit and reputation to British wares in general? What has this been owing to? To nothing more probably than the relaxation of the working people in their own way. **Were they obliged to toil the year round, the whole six days in the week, in a repetition of the same work, might it not blunt their ingenuity, and render them stupid instead of alert and dexterous;** and might not our workmen lose their reputation instead of maintaining it by such eternal slavery? ... And what sort of workmanship could we expect from such hard-driven animals? ... Many of them will execute as much work in four days as a Frenchman will in five or six. But if Englishmen are to be eternal drudges, ‘tis to be feared they will degenerate below the Frenchmen. As our people are famed for bravery in war, do we not say that it is owing to good English roast beef and pudding in their bellies, as well as their constitutional spirit of liberty? And why may not the superior ingenuity and dexterity of, our artists and manufacturers, be owing to that freedom and liberty to direct themselves in their own way, and I hope we shall never have them deprived of such privileges and that good living from whence their ingenuity no less than their courage may proceeds.”

^{iv} <http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/martineau-illustrations-of-political-economy-vol-8>

^v *Depression: A Public Feeling*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012.

^{vi} In a very different, but relevant, vein, Theodor Adorno in *The Stars Down to Earth and Other Essays on the Irrational in Culture* draws a connection between readers of the *L.A. Times* astrology column and fascist anti-Semites. Both demonstrate authoritarian tendencies in that they share—and seek means to remedy—an alienation that comes of capitalist modernity’s tedium, emptiness, dullness: “If, to the living, objective reality seems deaf as never before, they [people] try to elicit meaning from it by saying abracadabra” (174). For Adorno this is the result of an extreme anti-materialism: “not even Descartes drew the line so cleanly. Division of labour and reification are taken to the extreme: body and soul severed in a kind of perennial vivisection” (177).

^{vii} As Susan James summarizes of the C18 in particular: we might say that “during this period there was an important change in the received view of the mechanisms that enable affects to move around. . . . [A] broadly physical

interpretation of transmission gives way to a broadly psychic one,” which in turn provides a “comparatively resilient conception of the boundary around the self.”

^{viii} Respectively, in *Enseignement universel, langue maternelle* and *Enseignement universel, langue étrangères* (*Universal Education, Mother Tongue* and *Universal Education, Foreign Languages* [or *Tongues*]).

^{ix} Ross notes that it is impossible at times to determine where Rancière’s voice ends and Jacotot’s begins, which reminds us that this technique, though unusual in philosophical writing, is familiar to literary scholars as FID.

^x In *Barnaby Rudge*, the “idiot” (56 and elsewhere) Barnaby is more animal than man, with an “expression quite unearthly” and “glassy” eyes: “the absence of the soul is far more terrible in a living man than in a dead one,” the narrator tells us; “and in this unfortunate being its noblest powers were wanting” (35). But John Willet, the “burly, large-headed” landlord [owner?] of the Maypole, is simply slow: it is “by very slow degrees,” Dickens writes, that Willet can “get some . . . little circumstances into his brain” (87). Visitors to the inn are used to the very long pauses between Willet’s hearing or seeing a thing and his responding to it. At the end of a single paragraph in which a stranger’s physical appearance is described, Dickens tells us: “It would have taken him [Willet] at least a fortnight to have noted what is here set down” (87). When that man’s horse is taken to stable, Willet looks but does not understand: “He melts, I think. He goes like a drop of froth. You look at him, and there he is. You look at him again, and—there is isn’t” (89). Upon learning who this visitor really is, John “was so very much astonished . . . that he could express no astonishment at all, by looks or otherwise, but left the room as if he were in the most placid and imperturbable of all possible conditions. It has been reported that when he got down stairs, he looked steadily at the boiler for ten minutes by the clock, and all that time never once left off shaking his head” (92-4). As the narrator describes: “It was John Willet’s ordinary boast in his more placid moods that if he was slow he was sure: which assertion could in one sense at least be by no means gainsaid, seeing that he was in everything unquestionably the reverse of fast, and withal one of the more dogged and positive fellows in existence – always sure that what he thought or said or did was right, and holding it as a thing quite settled and ordained by the laws of nature and Providence, that anybody who said or did or thought otherwise must be inevitably and of necessity wrong” (8).

^{xi} Here is Karl Marx, in *Capital*, describing the “bourgeois stupidity” of Bentham: “Bentham is a purely English phenomenon. Not even excepting our philosopher, Christian Wolff, in no time and in no country has the most homespun commonplace ever strutted about in so self-satisfied a way. The principle of utility was no discovery of Bentham. He simply reproduced in his dull way what Helvétius and other Frenchmen had said with esprit in the 18th century. To know what is useful for a dog, one must study dog-nature. This nature itself is not to be deduced from the principle of utility. Applying this to man, he that would criticise all human acts, movements, relations, etc., by the principle of utility, must first deal with human nature in general, and then with human nature as modified in each historical epoch. Bentham makes short work of it. With the driest naiveté he takes the modern shopkeeper, especially the English shopkeeper, as the normal man. Whatever is useful to this queer normal man, and to his world, is absolutely useful. This yard-measure, then, he applies to past, present, and future. The Christian religion, e.g., is “useful,” “because it forbids in the name of religion the same faults that the penal code condemns in the name of the law.” Artistic criticism is “harmful,” because it disturbs worthy people in their enjoyment of Martin Tupper, etc. With such rubbish has the brave fellow, with his motto, “*nuila dies sine line!*,” piled up mountains of books. Had I the courage of my friend, Heinrich Heine, I should call Mr. Jeremy a genius in the way of bourgeois stupidity.” In Volume I, footnote 50.

^{xii} A.P.R. Howatt, with H.G. Widdowson, *A History of English Language Teaching*, 2nd ed. Oxford University Press, 2004.

^{xiii} Says the father to his wife, “He takes after your family, Bessy” (*ibid*).